Ethnic pride and racial prejudice in Victorian Cape Town

Group identity and social practice, 1875–1902

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1 Introduction

In the early twentieth century the city of Cape Town, the capital of the British Cape Colony, was an exceptional place in southern Africa. At least this was the judgement of the American historian George Fredrickson. He was not referring to the city's size or functions, or even its extraordinarily beautiful setting beneath Table Mountain, on the shores of Table Bay. For Fredrickson, Cape Town's significance lay in 'its traditional toleration of white–Colored intermingling in public places'. The city had a 'special tradition of multi-racialism', and

> fraternization between racial groups in Cape Town remained relatively free and unimpaired by laws or even strong and consistent patterns of customary exclusion until well into the twentieth century.

Such toleration was apparently not extant in other South African cities, or those of the American South, by the 1890s.[1] In his chapter on the growth of towns in the *Oxford History of South Africa*, David Welsh also suggested that Cape Town was unique among South African cities 'in the extent to which it was racially integrated'.[2]

In support of their contentions, both Fredrickson and Welsh quoted from an account of his visit to Cape Town in 1911 by Maurice Evans, an expert on the 'native question'. Here, writing in the third person, he describes his experiences:

> He hears that it is quite a common thing for the European immigrant introduced for railway and mechanical work to marry, even to prefer to marry, women of colour ... he sees a toleration of colour and a social admixture to which he is quite unaccustomed; it is evident on the streets, on the tramcars, in the railway stations, public offices, and in places of entertainment ... impossible in an eastern town such as Durban or Pietermaritzburg ... [in a cinema] ... he will find no distinction made, all and any colour occupy the same seats, cheek by jowl, and sometimes on each other's knees.[3]

Despite the evidence from Evans, the contentions of Fredrickson and Welsh were based on little primary research, as both would undoubtedly

acknowledge. Yet many Capetonians today also believe that their city was a haven of ethnic harmony and integration before the coming of Apartheid in 1948. They believe that segregation was something imposed on the city from outside. The culprits were Afrikaner nationalists, of an intolerant northern *voortrekker* tradition. These nationalists, in their administrative fastness of Pretoria, were hostile to the liberal Cape tradition. This tradition, based on equality of all before the law and a non-racial franchise, was epitomised and symbolised by social relations in the southern legislative capital, '*Kaapstad*', the mother city.

After 1948, putting a master plan of social engineering into operation, 'Pretoria' introduced the Acts that destroyed ethnic harmony. The Population Registration Act legally defined people according to race. The Group Areas Act determined where members of each race should live. The Separate Amenities Act became South Africa's comprehensive Jim Crow law. The Mixed Marriages Act, in Orwellian vein, prevented them between people defined as belonging to different races. Only in the 1980s did the nationalists began to see, or were made to see, the error of their ways.

What both academic and popular versions of Cape Town's past have done is to suggest the tantalising possibility that for once there was a colonial town in which the 'distinctive social characteristic' was not 'the fact of race'[4] – a town which was in, of all places, the part of the world that was to become Apartheid South Africa. The initial motivation for this book was to examine this possibility. I wished to explore the extent and limitation of segregation on the basis of 'race' in colonial Cape Town. Living in Cape Town in the 1980s, when government ideology espoused the primordial nature of race and its historical efficacy, I even saw subversive possibilities in the project.

South Africa is now staggering away from institutionalised racism. 'Ethnicity' has replaced 'race' as the acceptable catchword of political pundits and social scientists. But 'ethnic' prejudice can be just as destructive as the 'racial' variety. Both can, and have, fuelled what I would call racism. Therefore a further purpose behind this book is, through a case study, to explain ethnicity and explore its relationship with racism. South Africa's future will be as Bosnian bleak as its past if 'ethnic cleansing', from whatever quarter, replaces the desire for 'racial purity' as social practice.

Ethnicity, like class and community, is a concept that can be used to describe group identity. Group identities, like the concepts that describe them, are socially constructed and subject to change. Group identities do not, as I hope to show, evolve in any linear or predictable way, and should not be reified as primordial or permanent. Therefore particular

ethnicities are best explained through historical methodology. Once people are seen by themselves or others as, say, Muslim, working class or from London's East End, this does not necessarily remain the case permanently. Some may reject identities that they once accepted or take on identities they once rejected. Equally 'different' group identities can coexist, reinforce, influence or cut across each other, have greater or lesser salience for the same individual, even in the course of a single day.

It follows that if the terms we use to describe group identities are to have individual analytical value, we should define the different meanings we attach to them. 'Race' and 'ethnicity' are often used interchangeably in the late twentieth century, as 'race' and 'class' were in the nineteenth. 'Race' was a concept frequently used by Capetonians, and visitors to late Victorian Cape Town, to categorise others and themselves. The varied meanings which they attributed to race are best demonstrated in their historical context, and will be.

'Ethnicity' is a modern derivative from *ethnos* the Greek word for nation or people. Even the older English terms 'ethnie' and 'ethnic' were very seldom used in nineteenth-century Cape Town.[5] I will be using ethnicity to mean the perception that a person has of having common ancestry or permanent cultural ties with one collection of people, one ethnic group, rather than another or others. Such perceived difference will be given a collective name such as Afrikaner, Coloured, or Christian. Ethnicity will be conferred or enhanced by informal or formal education as well as by shared activities and symbols.

An ethnicity will be further strengthened when its adherents are encouraged, their ethnicity perhaps given greater and newly invented content, by ethnic mobilisers. These are usually politicians, journalists or teachers who propagate the idea that the group has common interests, history or destiny. Implicitly or explicitly they will suggest that individual interests can be advanced or defended by the collective action of the group.[6]

Much of what I have said about ethnicity applies to other terms for group identities that appear in this book. The two most frequently used are 'community' and 'class'. 'Ethnicity' and 'community' are often used as synonyms. It would seem to be an appropriate distinction to give 'community' a spatial dimension, even if the spatial boundaries of a community are not always absolutely clear and might change over time. Consciousness of belonging to a community has both a real and imagined component in my use of the term. The real component is provided through occupational, kinship and neighbourly ties so that members of a community can have a real rather than purely imagined sense of knowing many, if not all, other members. But there is an element

of imagination involved in turning such ties or knowledge into a sense of community, in converting community-in-itself into community-for-itself, so to speak. Some members of a community might be particularly responsible for doing so, to, for instance, defuse potential conflict along class lines. As Belinda Bozzoli has pointed out, a sense of community has often been strengthened in the South African context by an external 'hostile environment'.[7]

Imagination is also a part of class consciousness, but I will use the term 'class' in both the objective and subjective senses of 'class-in-itself' and 'class-for-itself'. I will categorise people according to my perception of their relationship to the means of production, and thereby to one another. But it will be assumed that class only exists as a social identity when people so categorised become aware, in historical situations, of those relationships.

Two other terms central to my analysis and arguments are 'racialisation' and 'racism'. 'Racialisation' I use to describe the process whereby meaning is attached to real or imagined biological and heritable difference in human beings, to 'race'. Often such difference is perceived in lightness or darkness of pigmentation – 'colour'. Sense of belonging to a race is one manifestation of ethnicity. I use 'racial' as a synonym for 'racialised'. 'Racism' occurs when signification attached to difference is predominantly negative. Racialisation and racism can occur whether or not the term 'race' is actually used in elite or popular discourse.[8]

All group identities and their corollary, categorisation of others, are highly situational. Context is crucial. Therefore this book needs to explain Cape Town as a place, needs to be a work of urban history. As such it combines the approaches that Checkland foresaw as dominating the future of this sub-discipline: analysing a city's function; exploring themes such as the economic, social, governmental, spatial and perceptual; but doing so within a focus on a particular city, itself seen within 'grand processes' such as industrialisation and in relation to other cities held to belong to (and differ from) the same 'category'.[9] In providing what one might call an urban profile of Cape Town, it is hoped that this will be useful for comparative purposes with similar studies that exist for both colonial and non-colonial cities within and outside southern Africa.

This book, then, is an exploration of group identities – their causes, contents and practical consequences – within a history of Cape Town. The organising question remains to what extent Cape Town really was an exceptional place in southern Africa in its 'tradition of multi-racialism' and, if so, why? Fredrickson offered an answer to the second

part of this question. He argued that a combination of the 'notorious permeability of the colour line' with a 'certain tolerance of miscegenation' had made segregated public accommodation 'not only contrary to local traditions but impracticable'. For Fredrickson the presence of the political and legal Cape liberal tradition, and the absence of Black 'institutional parallelism', explain the lack of segregation in the Cape in general compared to other parts of southern Africa or the American South.[10]

Unfortunately Fredrickson seriously underestimated the extent of segregation in the city before 1948. *De facto* segregation existed in many amenities, social activities and institutions between 1875 and 1902. Fredrickson's explanation of the 'special tradition' is anyway logically flawed. The existence of the 'notorious permeability of the colour line' was certainly used on occasions to explain why segregation in Cape Town was, or would be, difficult to attain. It probably does help to explain why *de jure* segregation was delayed in education and some government institutions in the city. But this permeability ultimately did not prevent the introduction of comprehensive segregation in Cape Town by the second half of the twentieth century.

'Contrary to local traditions' explains everything and nothing. It begs the question of why those local traditions existed in the first place. And the Cape liberal tradition did not stop the Native Reserve Location Act of 1902 giving *de jure* weight to African residential segregation, or the School Board Act of 1905 doing the same for education. As we shall demonstrate, Black 'parallel institutions' did come into being in late nineteenth-century Cape Town.

So we are left wondering why segregation in the city lagged behind the rest of South Africa, and why it took on different forms in different places? I will argue in subsequent chapters that the nature of economic activity and consequent employment patterns in Cape Town, and how this changed over time and differed from other parts of South Africa, is a crucial part of the answer. So is the relationship between ethnicity and divisions of labour in different places, and the timing of outbreaks of war and disease. In the case of cities, function and geographical location could also affect the extent and nature of segregation.[11] As was the case in the American South, so could chronological origins, because 'older towns possessed pre-existing racial patterns that altered more slowly', that could, perhaps, only be altered at considerable expense.[12]

This still leaves the question of why segregation became such an increasingly important feature of Cape Town, and southern African, society between 1875 and 1902. The debate about the origins of segregation dominated South African historiography in the 1970s and

early 1980s, and has been described in Harrison Wright's *Burden of the Present*.[13] According to Wright, 'radicals' (typically neo-Marxist revisionists) attacked what they perceived to be the 'liberal' orthodoxy: that economic growth associated with capitalist development was inimical to segregation and vice versa.

The radicals argued that the growth of segregation had served the specific needs of capitalism in South Africa. For them Apartheid ceased to be the economically illogical legacy of the frontier, the creation of Afrikaner nationalism, of the alleged liberal scenario. Instead, intensified racism, culminating in Apartheid, came with discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886): the Mineral Revolution. An ethnic division of labour and segregation were in the interests of, and therefore promoted by, the mining magnates of Kimberley and the Rand. Consequently, from the late nineteenth century, legislation was passed which accomplished two aims. It destroyed the economic independence of African peasant producers so that their labour could be available for, and hyper-exploited by, mine owners, farmers and industrialists. Second, it provided for institutions and practices in South African cities that created an ethnically divided labour force and, specifically, a high degree of control over African labour.

By the mid-1980s, both liberals and radicals had shied away from maintaining that either ethnicity (more often called 'race' in the literature) or class had played the primary role in bringing about segregation.[14] However, Fredrickson, for instance, still saw as crucial the role of 'traditional' attitudes in influencing the response of employers of labour in the era of the Mineral Revolution. Without their inherited prejudices, employers would have 'hired the best individuals for the job regardless of their ancestry'. In contrast, John Cell, while acknowledging the role of 'tradition', argued that it was mining capital that brought about the significantly new institutions of segregation in the late nineteenth century. A further purpose of this book is to examine the relationship between ideology and social practice for Cape Town.[15]

However, it is possible to discern a new and improved analysis of the origins of segregation in South Africa gradually emerging from the dialectic between liberals and radicals. This analysis acknowledges the existence of racism before the Mineral Revolution, in the slave-owning Cape and the constitutions and social practices of the Afrikaner Republics, and the contribution of 'scientific' views about race towards its intensification thereafter. Kimberley was the place where crucial features of urban segregation arose: the labour registration office, migrant labour controlled via a pass system and the labour compound.[16]

Shula Marks, following David Welsh, emphasised the 'rural dimensions of segregation' offered by Natal:

> the allocation of reserved lands vested in a Trust for purely African occupation; the control of urban immigration through the registration of casual labour; the use of the Governor as Supreme Chief; the 'recognition' of African customary law; the manipulation of chiefs as agents of the colonial state.[17]

These long-enduring features of segregation were not just invented and imposed by the Natal ruling class, let alone Transvaal mine owners. Nor were they necessarily functional to capital.[18] Instead, they substantially reflected the very real existence of African societies 'with their own traditions and geographical base', whose members could, and did, attempt to resist incorporation or assimilation into colonial society.[19]

Most recently, and in not dissimilar vein, Clifton Crais has offered the Eastern Cape's contribution to segregation. He has showed that it produced colonial Africa's first 'native reserves', passes for 'native foreigners' and earlier urban locations than those of the mining centres. He has powerfully reaffirmed that social relations on the frontier, as well as under slavery, generated racism.[20]

There are still many gaps. They include the absence of a major study on any of the towns of the Cape, *sans* Kimberley, in the nineteenth century: one more reason for this book.

The point is that many parts of what was to become South Africa, including Cape Town, practised forms of segregation in the nineteenth-century and generated racism. They can all, correctly, be offered as providing precedents for aspects of the ideology and practice of Apartheid. But seeking a single origin for twentieth-century practice has been, and would be, a misguided exercise. Equally, different manifestations of segregation, or its extent and limitations, can only be explained by detailed histories of different places. Hence the need for a monograph. Segregation, and racist discourses, were situational, even if they could and did inform one another.

Saul Dubow has convincingly argued that 'segregation' did not become a 'keyword' in the discourse of South African politicians until the twentieth century. He suggests that one of the first occasions it was used was when the Governor opened the Cape parliament in 1902. Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson said that the government should be 'endowed with larger powers than they now possess to effectively carry out the policy of segregation'.[21]

As with the American South, the precise chronological origins of this ideology in nineteenth-century South Africa have hitherto been obscure.

This monograph attempts to trace and explains its emergence in Cape Town by the 1890s, even if 'separation' rather than 'segregation' was the 'keyword'. Without, I hope, falling prey to the 'idol of origins', I will seek at the same time to demonstrate that in South Africa, as in the American South, Jim Crow was a 'city slicker'.[22] In other words the Separate Amenities Act legalised many practices that had been extant in Cape Town since the nineteenth century, as they had been in other southern African cities.

These practices grew, and came to interact with an ideology of racial separation, in the course of the economic and social changes wrought by the Mineral Revolution. This begins to explain the chronological starting-point of this study. The major diamond discoveries at Kimberley in 1870 were beginning to have a dramatic effect on Cape Town's economy. The information contained in the Cape government census of 1875 is extremely useful in giving a picture of economic activity and social structure at the advent of this change.

During the Mineral Revolution, Cape Town's merchants and businessmen, her dominant class, moved closer to the social practices of their northern counterparts. They did so because they were forced to come to terms with economic and demographic change on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The problems they faced were similar to those that confronted Wiebe's 'middle-class' Americans at roughly the same time: how to maintain social order in a society undergoing rapid urbanisation, immigration and industrialisation. The latter, together with the enhanced possibilities of social mobility, combined to challenge the 'traditional system' of social relations in Cape Town: dominance of White over Black.[23] They found their answer in forms of segregation.

Mirroring a similar development described by Andrews for Buenos Aires, it was during economic booms, rather than depressions, that the challenge was most severe.[24] In consequence it was during the boom years from 1875 to 1882, and especially 1891 to 1902, that new forms of segregation generated within the city were most in evidence. In contrast, Van Onselen has shown for Johannesburg that depression years were more significant in this respect because they led to poor Whites demanding differential state intervention on their behalf.[25] In the 1880s depression in Cape Town the poor united across potential ethnic divides. But the depression helped to change dominant-class attitudes to poverty and the poor. It led many to make distinctions on the basis of racialisation and racism, and thereby promoted the ideology of racial separation.

Dominant-class consciousness in Cape Town in 1875 was informed by White (or 'European') ethnicity. But there was little attempt to separate

Whites from Blacks throughout society. The forms of segregation that existed demonstrated and preserved the power of the dominant class. They did not emphasise White ethnic solidarity across potential class divides.

By 1902, ethnic solidarities that did cut across class divisions tended to be of greater significance than they had been in 1875. English and Afrikaner ethnicity now had meaning for many Capetonians in this respect. So did African ethnicity for those forced into locations in 1901 because they were 'natives'. And in 1902 an organisation was formed to defend the 'Coloured People's social, political and civil rights'.[26]

Ethnicity did not simply replace other forms of group identity. Class and community consciousness continued to interact with and occasionally subsume ethnicity. Working-class and occupational consciousness had their salient moments between 1875 and 1902, and beyond. In the 1880s, for instance, there were several demonstrations and strikes jointly embraced by workers of different potential ethnicities. Some artisan trade unions had White and Coloured members in the 1890s and 1900s. And there was still 'multi-racial' social activity for Evans to witness in 1911.

Writing about group identity and social practice in Cape Town does not mean that we can ignore 'rural dimensions', or what was happening in mining centres. On the contrary, it is only by analysing the connections between the different sectors of the Cape's political economy that it is possible to understand what was happening in Cape Town. Only then does it become clear why the city was indeed an 'exceptional' place in southern Africa in some respects, but so similar in others.